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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001739

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV

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TAGS: [PGOV TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI PARLIAMENT FORMALLY RE-ELECTS THAKSIN AS
PRIME MINISTER

REF: A) BANGKOK 1278 B) BANGKOK 1375

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke, Section 1.4 (b)

11. (U) Summary: On March 9, in a vote that surprised no one, Thailand's new National Assembly chose Thaksin Shinawatra as Prime Minister, formally completing a historic re-election bid, the first time an elected Thai PM has regained the top post after a full four-year term. The over-whelmed political opposition dissented from the choice of Thaksin as PM, with most abstaining. Royal approval of a controversial Thaksin proposal to streamline the authority of the cabinet in cases of national emergency appears imminent, but the proposal continues to be decried as an end-around of proper democratic procedures by critics. The official cabinet lineup will be announced March 11. End Summary.

12. (U) On March 9, the third full day of official business by Thailand's new 500-member National Assembly, 377 parliamentarians (MP) chose incumbent PM Thaksin Shinawatra of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party as prime minister. 116 MPs abstained, 1 voted "no" and 6 were recorded absent. This outcome was no surprise following TRT's landslide victory on February 6 (Ref A). According to Parliamentary sources, 374 of TRTs 377 MPs voted for Thaksin, along with two Mahachon Party MPs, who form that party's entire parliamentary delegation. Joining the "yes" votes for Thakin was Chart Thai (CT) Party leader and former prime minister Banharn Silapachha, who made good on his public promise to vote for Thaksin. Those abstaining included all of the main opposition Democrat Party (DP) members present, 23 members of the CT Party and Thaksin himself. Another CT MP, controversial massage parlor tycoon turned politician Chuwit Kamolvisit, was the only MP to vote against Thaksin. Chuwit is making every effort to gather as much personal publicity as he can by not following conventional Thai political norms, one of which stipulates that members (especially first term MPs) should follow the party leader's direction. In another break with tradition, the three new Assembly leaders voted for the Prime Minister. In the past, the Assembly President and Deputies abstained as a symbol of neutrality. (Note: Prior to the vote for prime minister, the National Assembly on March 7 had elected former Interior Minister Phokin Phalakun as President of the National Assembly (equivalent to Speaker of the House), veteran MP Suchart Thancharoen as 1st Vice President, and Lalita Leksamran as 2nd Vice President. All three are TRT party MPs. Lalita's election marked the first time a woman was selected for that post. End note.)

CONTROVERSIAL POWERS TO HOLD CABINET MEETINGS APPROVED

13. (C) Despite his overwhelming victory and popularity, Thaksin continues to be controversial. One example is the February 25 revelation by Borwornsak Uwanno, Secretary to the Cabinet, that PM Thaksin has proposed cabinet "reforms (which will be submitted to the King for Royal approval on March 11) to allow him to call a cabinet meeting with a quorum of only one-third of the 35 cabinet ministers, or 12 members. The Constitution does not specifically state the number of ministers required for a quorum, but generally it has been the practice that at least half the ministers be present, mirroring the requirement that at least half the members of parliament must be present to form a quorum in the nation's House of Representatives. While 12 ministers would be needed under "normal" circumstances, the proposal also states that under "emergency situations, cases important to the national interest," and for the benefit of secrecy, a cabinet meeting can take place with the Prime Minister and only one cabinet member. Borwornsak has unconvincingly argued in public that these changes are simply designed to make the Cabinet more efficient. Embassy sources inside the PM's office expect that the proposal will be endorsed by the King (who does not normally intervene in day-to-day politics) and become effective on March 12, just prior to the endorsement of the new cabinet.

CRITICS REACT

14. (U) Opposition leaders, academics and local press have all severely criticized the Cabinet reform plan, generally characterizing it as a dangerous move giving too much

authority to the executive. They also pointed out that it was unnecessary as there are already measures in place for the cabinet to operate expeditiously in times of national emergency. The announcement of the reform plan coincided with the release of a paper by Thirayut Boonmi, a Thammasat University Sociology professor well-known for his trenchant criticism of Thaksin. His study compared the Thaksin "regime" to that of former Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who served as the nation's prime minister from 1958 to 1963 and enacted many dictatorial laws to uphold Sarit's grip on power. Others have been just as critical but more plain spoken. One critic, noted lawyer and Senator Thongchai Thongso, warned that "Power is being consolidated into the hands of one man, Thaksin." Thaksin's timing for announcement of the Cabinet reform plan seemed poorly planned, coming on the heels of sharp negative public reaction to his color-coded "zoning plan" to guide distribution of government funds in Thailand's separatist violence-plagued three most southernmost provinces (Ref B).

CABINET LIST OUT MARCH 11

5.(U) On March 11, Thaksin will submit his list of 35 cabinet members to the King for approval. This list will name selections for 7 deputy PMs, 19 ministers and 9 deputy ministers. Speculation on who will get what position is rife, but still unreliable. It is expected that many familiar faces from the first Thaksin administration will reappear, some wearing a new hat. It's also expected that the PM will appear with his full cabinet for an audience with the King on March 14.

BOYCE